TRT
world
forum
2019

Closed Session

The Predicament of Political Legitimacy in the MENA Region

Dr Jana Jabbour

Closed Session

The Predicament of Political Legitimacy in the MENA Region

The TRT World Forum 2019, recognised as one of the most significant political events of the year, took place from October 21st- 22nd at the Istanbul Congress Center with over one thousand esteemed guests and panellists. Consisting of nine keynote speeches and exclusive talks, 12 public sessions, and 15 closed sessions this year's Forum succeeded in providing a platform for serious engagement with the most pressing challenges of our time. The themes of the sessions ranged from the rise of far-right terrorism, populism and nationalism, environmental issues, the future of the Middle East, trade wars, the future of the European Union and cooperation of emerging powers. Uniting all of these themes was a focus on the fragmented state of today's world and a sincere desire to offer meaningful solutions.

This roundtable meeting was held in English under the Chatham House Rule. This rule stipulates that 'when a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

Jana Jabbour,

Dr Jana Jabbour holds a PhD in Political Science and International Relations and teaches political science at Sciences Po Paris. Her research focuses on rising powers and their diplomatic behaviour, with a special focus on contemporary Turkey. In 2017, she published 'Turkey: Designing a Rising Power's Diplomacy', an acclaimed book on the topic of Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East under the rule of the AK Party. She has published extensively about the balance of power in the Middle East and the politics of regional powers. Her expertise on Turkey is regularly sought by governmental institutions in France and the EU. She is a regular guest speaker on various media outlets, including TRT World, FRANCE24, and CNBC.

Introduction

In 1977, Michael C. Hudson claimed that the central problem of government in the Arab world was political illegitimacy. After 40 years, in early 2011, the onset of mass revolts in large parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have highlighted the key relevance of the question of political legitimacy in MENA countries. The 'Arab Spring' raised hopes that Arab states were finally on the verge of a democratic awakening, putting an end to decades of authoritarianism, and establishing a new and more legitimate political order reflecting the liberal aspirations of the people. However, nine years later, the region is experiencing a 'counterrevolutionary' wave and a comeback of authoritarianism, as well as state failure and state fragmentation. In parallel, non-state actors are emerging, such as ISIS, who question the political legitimacy of the Sykes-Picot order and highlight the failures and weaknesses of the artificially-created Arab States which were born on the ashes of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, almost a century after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, one question is still to be answered by Arab leaders and populations: what follows the Ottoman sultan-caliph as the source of political legitimacy?

In political literature, the word 'legitimacy' refers to the unanimous, near-universal agreement by citizens on the rules of the political game within a given state. In that sense, consent of the governed is the source of political legitimacy. Hence, in its most comprehensive definition, political legitimacy goes beyond holding free and fair elections. It is about enshrining the consent of the governed in the parameters and rules of the political game. This means establishing constitutional frameworks and institutions that protect the rights of citizens, guarantee the rule of law and build inclusive societies.

Many leaders across MENA face a crisis in legitimising their rule after having used autocratic practices and methods to sustain their own power during the past decades. In addition, being responsible for terror, violence and human displacement, some of these leaders are no longer capable of implementing a social contract that guarantees peace, security and stability. Moreover, the MENA remains one of the most unstable regions on earth. State failure, wars, civil strife, terrorism and migration flows are all destabilising elements that make managing power and governance in many MENA countries a problematic question. Political legitimacy remains very fragile, even in seemingly stable countries.

This closed session, entitled 'The Predicament of Political Legitimacy in the MENA Region', attempted to explore the driving factors and the solutions to this issue. The panelists, coming from various backgrounds and endowed with different expertise, sought to answer the following questions: What is the status of the legitimacy of Arab governments following the Arab Spring and its aftermath? How is political legitimacy understood in a region comprising states and societies as divergent as Lebanon and Saudi Arabia? What methods are being deployed by the Arab regimes in order to solidify their rule? Can a single model of political legitimacy be applied to the region? Beyond the crisis of political legitimacy, where is the region heading?

The Nature of Political Legitimacy in the MENA Region

The panelists started by setting the parameters of the debate and defining the contours of the notion of political legitimacy in the region. One panelist drew the audience's attention to the choice of wording in the title of the discussion: the use of the term 'predicament', rather than 'crisis, pinpoints the serious difficulties one encounters in finding a solution to this problem of lack of legitimacy in the MENA region.

Political legitimacy is indeed a slippery and multifaceted concept that must be considered with caution, especially given that there is a discrepancy between the internal and external perception of what is legitimate. Often times, as one panelist suggested, the domestic public opinion would consider a state behavior as legitimate, while the international community would view it as illegitimate. The ongoing military operation of Turkey in Northern Syria offers a perfect illustration of this: while many Turks support this operation and view it as legitimate, as it seeks to protect the borders of their country and to guarantee peace and security, a large part of the international community continues to consider Turkey's operation as illegitimate. As no superior authority can solve the problem of the discrepancy between the internal and external perception of legitimacy, it is important, as the panelist highlighted, that leaders and people adopt a 'modest' attitude towards others and respect the genuine differences in perceptions.

Overall, the speakers identified four levels of debate about the nature of political legitimacy within the MENA region. The first level of debate concerns what the people want. While in the West, people want good governance in the sense of decent relations between the state and the society based on international norms, in the MENA region citizens have more basic demands. They need order and stability. As one panelist put it, 'In the MENA region, people prefer a thousand years of tyranny to a single day of chaos'. Whether in Libya, Yemen, Syria or Iraq, there is a popular craving for order. Hence, order and stability become the prime imperative for legitimacy. A legitimate leader would be one that satisfies the people's longing for peace and security.

The second level of debate concerns the historical roots of legitimacy. In the MENA region, one cannot talk about legitimacy without mentioning the damage of 'peace diplomacy' after World War I. The Balfour declaration created a Jewish state at the heart of the MENA region, while the Sykes-Picot agreement, which paved the way for French and British rule over parts of the lands of the Ottoman Empire[1], imposed artificial borders and created states on an arbitrary basis. One of the consequences of such European colonial practices was the splitting of ethnicities into different states. In the wake of World War I, Ottoman Kurds for instance, once united under the multiethnic Ottoman Empire, were scattered across Turkey and Iraq, which was under British rule.They were therefore deprived of their right to live together. Overall, the panelists agreed that the historical process that led to the creation of independent Arab states caused tremendous suffering and is viewed by some populations of the MENA region as illegitimate, precisely because it was driven by European colonialist powers.

The third level of debate concerns the normative framework of political legitimacy. What determines political legitimacy is the extent to which a government respects the law internally and internationally. This could entail respecting the authority of the United Nations, refusing to adopt 'criminal', violent behavior vis-à-vis a population, or avoiding the use of force in maintaining order. n However, one panelist high-

---

[1] Lebanon and France became French mandates, while Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine became British mandates

lighted that in the particular context of the MENA region, the postcolonial order necessarily had to rely on force and coercion as it was an artificial order created by Europeans. It was viewed as illegitimate by a large part of the Arab population. Such order could not rest on consent as the local communities did not feel any belonging or attachment to it.

The fourth level of debate concerns the neglected dimension of political legitimacy: the role of geopolitics in the MENA region. An Arab state or ruler is seen as politically legitimate by Western powers insofar as he respects their geopolitical interests in terms of sustaining Israel, containing Islam, containing nuclear proliferation (Iran) and accessing energy resources (oil). In fact, as Zaki Laidi (2012) highlights in his book *Limited Achievements: Obama's Foreign Policy*[2], throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Western powers have established a 'pact of silence' with Arab authoritarian rulers. In return for the latter's support in containing Islamist groups and defending Israel, Western powers turned a blind eye to the Arab rulers' autocratic practices and their violation of democracy and human rights. Hence, conforming to the geopolitical agenda of Western powers was a guarantee of 'external' political legitimacy. However, at the domestic-internal level, Arab rulers' accommodation of Western interests contributed to delegitimising them in the eyes of their own populations.

Bringing in the Religious Dimension

One cannot reflect on political legitimacy in the MENA region without taking into consideration its religious dimension. Indeed, the question of political legitimacy has been one of the most problematic and contentious issues in the history of the region since the death of Prophet Mohammad. In fact, the Prophet's death ignited an open-ended debate: Who has legitimacy to be the successor and to rule? Who has the right to make decisions and to lead? This *paved* the way for disputes inside the Community of Believers *(the Ummah)* and led the way to the Shia/Sunni divide.

One of the problems that Islamic thought has suffered from is that the scholars and jurists who addressed the issue of political legitimacy after the Prophet's death were mainly concerned about guaranteeing order and stability, and preventing *fitna* (civil strife) and chaos. They were therefore willing to sacrifice democratic principles on the altar of political stability.

The Ottoman Empire and Caliphate partly answered the question of political legitimacy after the death of the Prophet. In fact, the Sultans managed to consolidate their rule by claiming a religious legitimacy deriving from their status as 'Caliphs', successors of the Prophet. However, the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk opened an era of confusion and political wandering for most Arabs and Muslims: having once been united as one Islamic Ummah under the Caliphate, they were suddenly divided into artificially-created states. Almost a century after the fall of the Empire, some Arabs and Muslims still express nostalgia for the 'golden era' of the past, longing for the unity that existed under the Caliphate.

It is also worth mentioning, as one panelist highlighted, that the Islamic corpus which the jurists produced after the death of Prophet Mohammad is used today to legitimise the nature of political rule in several MENA countries. Saudi Arabia's monarchy hence draws its political legitimacy from being the custodian of the two holy places (*Al-Haramayn*, Mecca and Medina) as well as from the Wahhabi/Ibn Taymiyya school of thought. The king of Morocco, however, claims a religious legitimacy as a descendant of the Prophet. In a way, political legitimacy in the region has often been intertwined with religious legitimacy.

---

[2] See bibliography for the full reference

The Nexus Between State-Building and Lack of Political Legitimacy

A critical examination of the state-building process in the MENA region shows that political illegitimacy has been an intrinsic feature of Arab states since their inception.

It is worth first recalling that Arab states are postcolonial constructs. As James Barr[3] highlights in his book *A Line in the Sand: The Anglo-French Struggle for the Middle East*, Arab states were artificially created by the British and French colonial powers following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1918. (France imposed a mandate in Lebanon and Syria, while Britain took control of Jordan, Iraq and Palestine). In a sense, they were born out of an 'original sin'.

Second, Arab states, since their inception, have relied on 'hard power' to consolidate themselves. This reliance on hard power is a legacy of European colonialism. In fact, as soon as they established their mandates over Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Palestine, the British and the French powers sought to identify entities and actors in each Arab state who were capable of guaranteeing domestic stability while showing a certain level of discipline and obedience to the West. The military and security forces soon appeared as the most disciplined institutions, and ones that were best-positioned to impose order in a top-down fashion. The support European powers granted to the military ended up empowering the latter. Therefore, in the second half of the 20th century, Arab charismatic leaders, with the support of the army, undertook military coups d'états that served as the 'foundational acts' for building new authoritarian regimes. Gamal Abdelnasser, Saddam Hussein and Hafez al Assad have all established military dictatorships with a 'façade' of democracy. They managed to obtain a certain level of political legitimacy and consent from the governed

through the *assabiyya* they claimed ('esprit de corps' / social solidarity of a group, like the Alawites in Syria), or through a generous social contract which offered citizens significant welfare benefits in exchange for their obedience to the state and their non-interference in politics. In addition, these regimes managed to repress dissent through instrumentalising the Arab-Israeli conflict: under the pretext of the necessity to be united in the fight against Israel, Arab authoritarian leaders crushed any form of opposition to their rule. The need to ensure 'unicity of ranks' against the common enemy was a strong argument mobilised in their political rhetoric, and it served as an efficient means to repress citizens.

In other parts of the MENA region, in the Gulf monarchies, the ruling dynasties managed to consolidate their power through relying on oil wealth. Petrodollars were used to coopt citizens and buy their consent, while at the same time building a strong security apparatus able to repress any form of dissent. Cooption and repression, the carrot and the stick, were the matrix of the political system. In addition, in those oil-rich states, the absence of taxation of citizens freed the ruling elite from the pressure of democratisation and political representation; the motto 'no taxation without representation', which contributed to the rise of democracy in Europe, was reversed in the Arab context and replaced by 'no representation without taxation'. In other words, the fiscal autonomy of the state translated into increased political autonomy and authoritarian resilience. Rentierism hence guaranteed a certain degree of regime stability, despite a lack of political legitimacy.

Last but not least, a major strategy used by Arab autocrats to consolidate their rule has been the promotion of sectarianism to divide their societies and better rule

---

[3] See bibliography for the full reference

them. In fact, sectarian politics is at the core of author-itarianism: by mobilising the sectarian sentiment or 'assabiyya' of the members of their community, and by nurturing a Manichean vision of politics as a con-frontation between 'us', the minority, versus 'them, the majority, Bashar al Assad, Saddam Hussein, Ali Ab-dullah Saleh and even the Kings of Saudi Arabia have managed to consolidate their power. The rise of ISIS is nothing but the outcome of the injection of sectarian-ism into Arab societies throughout the past two dec-ades, and Iraqi Sunnis supported ISIS because of their feeling of being rejected and discriminated against by the Shia-dominated regime in Baghdad.

This pattern of sectarianism is nowhere more visible than in Lebanon. In this country, the 'National Pact'

established a specific power-sharing agreement that distributed political positions along confessional and sectarian lines. This led to the formation of political parties on religious lines, rather than over policy dif-ferences. Voting became an assertion of one's iden-tity rather than a real choice. Such a system created a distorted form of democracy, best characterized as 'communitocracy'[4]. The term refers to a commu-nitarian-based governance structure that rests on the assertion of communitarian differences and on rent-seeking between political parties. Such a system based on the rule of sectarian communities, on clien-telism, nepotism and corruption has suffered from a clear deficit of political legitimacy

The Debate over the Compatibility of Islam with Democracy

The resilience of authoritarianism in the MENA re-gion has raised a public and scientific debate on the compatibility of Islam with democracy. This debate is intellectually settled with a large majority of Islam-ic scholars and jurists agreeing that there is nothing un-Islamic about democracy. 'Democracy is Islamic', stated one panelist, observing that 'casting a vote in the ballot box is another form of obtaining consensus', and finding consensus *(ijmaa')* is at the heart of Islamic theology.

Yet one panelist pointed out that there still exist some societal factions who reject democracy in the MENA context. Among Muslims, two categories of people resist democracy: authoritarian leaders and religious authorities. The former reject democracy as they are the ones who will lose the most from democracy. These authoritarian leaders justify their reluctance to embrace democracy on the ground that democracy may bring chaos, while tyranny guarantees order and

stability. As to religious authorities, they are recalci-trant toward democracy because a democratic, secu-lar political system would deprive them of their influ-ence, authority, and power over society.

According to the same panelist, among non-Muslims in the West, it is possible to identify three categories of people who oppose democracy for Muslims: those who adopt racist thinking and believe that democra-cy is incompatible with Islam, and that there is some-thing in the Muslims' DNA that prevents them from embracing democracy; those who think that Muslims in general, and Arabs in particular, are unsuited for democracy, because they will misuse democracy to bring to power Islamist groups; and lastly, those who prefer to deal with autocrats who show obedience to Western powers and follow their orders. These people fear the popular will of any Muslims who might be tempted to vote for rulers who demonstrate an anti-Is-raeli and anti-Western sentiment.

---

[4] Imad Salamey, The Decline of Nation-States after the Arab Spring: The Rise of Communitocracy, Palgrave, 2017.

Arab Revolutions/ Counterrevolutions and the Predicament of Political Legitimacy

The MENA region is a postcolonial construct, and as it is characterised by high levels of foreign interventionism, making it a 'highly penetrated regional system'[5]. It is therefore important when reflecting upon political legitimacy in this region to distinguish between the legitimacy of Arab states as defined by the people living in the MENA region, and legitimacy of Arab states as defined by the West.

Political legitimacy, in its contemporary definition, stems from 'the people's belief that the institutions governing them have the right to do so', as one panelist highlighted. Therefore, the key question arises: Do people in the MENA region believe that the institutions ruling them have the right to do so? The answer has been provided by the Arab revolutions. People in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen and Syria took to the streets with one unifying motto – 'the people want to bring the regime down (*al sha'b yurid isqat al nizham)*, a regime they viewed as illegitimate. A new wave of the Arab revolutions, or an 'Arab Spring 2.0', has hit countries like Sudan, Iraq and Lebanon in 2019. People are protesting against the corruption of their rulers and the division of the political system across sectarian/confessional lines.

Another answer lies in the responses of the Arab regimes to the revolutions: the least legitimate the regime, the more brutal has been the response. In Bahrain, the ruling monarchy requested the solidarity and support of the GCC countries in the face of protesters whom Manama immediately portrayed as 'foreign agents' of Iran. On March 14, 2011, 1000 troops from Saudi Arabia and 500 troops from the UAE entered

Bahrain and crushed the uprising. The 'Pearl Roundabout' was cleared of protesters and the iconic statue at its center was destroyed. In Syria, Bashar Al Assad's response to the uprising which started in Der-e-Zor was no less problematic: severe violence was unleashed against protesters, showing the worst manifestation of what Nazih Ayubi (1996) coined as the 'fierce state'[6]. In Egypt, the coup d'etat by Abdelfattah Al Sissi in July 2013 toppled the democratically-elected president, Mohammad Morsi. In the aftermath of the coup, members of the Muslim Brotherhood movement were imprisoned, and large numbers of them were killed during the Rabaa Square demonstrations in August 2013. One panelist said, 'It is irrelevant how Islamist Mohammad Morsi was; what is relevant is that he was the first democratically-elected president in the history of Egypt, and he was toppled by the army, hence showing how non-democratic the political system is in Egypt'.

Overall, the Arab regimes' responses to the revolutions have revealed that Arab rulers have perceived themselves as illegitimate: their tough repression of protesters is nothing but the symptom of their inner feeling that they lack legitimacy. In that sense, violence is the weapon of the weakest.

What is the other side of the question? How does the West view this issue of legitimacy in the MENA region? One panelist stated, 'The legacy of the Crusaders is not completely dead yet. Turcophobia and Islamophobia still exist in the minds of many Westerners. They exist at the most sophisticated level, at the level of political philosophy and theology, but also at

---

[5] Raymond Hinnebush, The International Politics of the Middle East, Manchester University Press, 2015.
[6] Nazih Ayubi defines the "fierce state" as one that recourses to excessive violence, large army, harsh prisons, torture, and sometimes firing squads to preserve itself by force.

the most basic level, at the level of the public debate and popular culture'. This Islamophobia and Turcophobia push Westerners to deny political legitimacy to MENA regimes and rulers who challenge the West. They only grant it to those who show obedience to the West. The panelist hence added, 'While Westerners pay lip service to democracy, they truly do not mean it. They will support the most autocratic Arab rulers as long as the latter defend the interests of the West, largely defined in terms of securing oil and guaranteeing the security of Israel'.

Indeed, the question of the shared responsibility of the West in perpetuating authoritarianism in the region was brought up by all speakers. They all agreed that foreign interventionism in the region has contributed to the resilience of authoritarianism, because Western leaders have supported and endorsed Arab autocrats as long as the latter defended their interests. As one panelist stated, 'One of the main blows to political legitimacy in the MENA region is foreign interventionism to consolidate authoritarian leaders, thus enabling them to perpetuate their dysfunctional and illegitimate political system'. The panelist recalled that Bashar al Assad was for long considered by Westerners as a legitimate leader; for example, late French President Jacques Chirac built excellent bilateral relations with the Syrian regime. In addition, Egyptian President Abdelfattah Al Sissi currently benefits from Western support, despite his illegitimate seizure of power through a coup d'etat against the democratically-elected President Mohammad Morsi. As to several late presidents of the region, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Zein El Abidin Ben Ali of Tunisia, and Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria, they were all awarded the Louise Michel Prize for Human Rights and Democracy by the French Senate! Hence, at the core of the problem of a lack of political legitimacy in the MENA region is the foreign interference of Western powers. They acknowledge and support Arab autocrats despite their illegitimate practices.

All in all, Arab revolutions have gradually been replaced - as of 2013 - by counterrevolutions, be they in Egypt, Syria, Bahrain or Libya. These counterrevolutions were made possible through three factors: first, Western foreign interventionism in support of autocrats; second, the mobilisation by Arab autocrats (Abdelfattah al Sissi and Bashar al Assad, for example) of the 'deep state' (the army, the police and intelligence forces) to repress the opposition; and third, the policies of major regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which boosted counterrevolutionary forces in those Arab countries undergoing popular uprisings. It is worth examining this last point in greater detail. In fact, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were able to boost counterrevolutionary forces in Arab countries through three dynamics: first, through mobilising 'hard power', namely by sending their troops to repress the uprisings in their neighborhood, as exemplified by Riyadh's interventions in Bahrain and in Yemen; second, through resorting to 'checkbook diplomacy' to fund counterrevolutionary actors, as exemplified by Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's injection of 12 billion dollars into the Egyptian economy after the election of Abdelfattah al Sissi; third, by fueling the anti-Muslim sentiment in Western circles in order to de-legitimise Muslim Brotherhood-inspired groups who emerged victorious from the ballot box in the aftermath of the revolutions (Al Nahdha in Tunisia; the Justice and Freedom Party in Egypt). Indeed, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have systematically highlighted in their political rhetoric the danger of Islamists riding the wave of Arab revolutions to seize power and control the state. They nurtured, in Western circles, the fear of political Islam as a means to de-legitimise and even 'criminalise' Islamist groups who challenge the Gulf monarchies' rule. Islamophobia, therefore, went hand in hand with counterrevolution.

The Way Forward: Pathways to Rebuilding Political Legitimacy in the MENA Region

In a context where the MENA region is currently facing an unprecedented political, economic and social crisis, re-building legitimacy of regimes is crucial to help shape a better future. The speakers identified a series of political principles and conditions that need to exist and to be fulfilled in order for institutions to be legitimate. First, it was highlighted that the institutions and the political systems must be people-centered: the consent of the governed regarding the rules of the political game is crucial to ensure sustainability and legitimacy of any system. Scholars refer to the 'consent of the governed' as a precondition for democracies; however, there are many forms of democracies that could exist, and Arab elites and populations have yet to agree on what form of democracy is best suitable for their culture, their value system, and their specific historical, social and political context.

Second, political legitimacy must stem from constitutionalism: there needs to exist a social contract between those who govern and those who are governed, and between the citizens themselves, which clearly defines rights and duties of each party. Rule of law is also necessary to guarantee political legitimacy and to ensure that the rights of citizens are respected.

Third, a major condition for rebuilding political legitimacy in the MENA region is the restructuring of the sociopolitical system along civil-secular lines. A close examination of the behavior of Arab populations shows their longing for civilian/non-sectarian politics. An example of this is reflected in the motto the Syrian protesters used in the beginning of their uprising: *'Al sha'ab al suri wahed, wahed, wahed'* (The people of Syria are one, one, one (united)), which revealed the population's opposition to the sectarian division of their society between Sunnis and Alawites.

Fourth, the question of the role of religion in politics and public affairs must be sorted out, and a balance must be found between religion and secularism. One panelist stated that no political party should be exclusively based on religion, and that religion should not be used as an instrument when entering the political realm and partisan politics. The panelist suggested that Islamist movements be free to discuss public affairs, yet they should abstain from practicing partisan politics in the name of religion. This would protect Islam as a holy religion from being politically instrumentalised, while at the same time freeing the political arena from the dominance of religious discourse. The political system would thus be structured along civil rather than religious/ideological lines.

Fifth, it is necessary to find a balance between the rule of the majority and the respect for minority rights. Majoritarian understandings of democracy may lead to violations of human rights, in particular minority rights, thus undermining the political legitimacy of the regime.

The political system would thus be structured along civil rather than religious/ideological lines.

Sixth, social justice must be placed at the center of the political system. In many parts of the world, unrestrained capitalism is leading to major inequalities which undermine social justice and the right of all citizens to a decent life. This also undermines the state's political legitimacy. Hence the need to place social justice considerations at the top of the political agenda and ensure a better distribution of resources to guarantee the longevity and sustainability of the political system.

Other conditions and criteria of political legitimacy were identified: equality of all citizens before the law, regardless of their religion, ethnicity or gender; transparency and accountability to avoid corruption and abuse of power; a balance in civil-military relations in a way to prevent military tutelage over politics and the army's dominance over a civilian, democratically-elected government; non-interference of foreign powers in Arab states' domestic politics; free media that are able to inform the public; guaranteeing citizens' rights to dissent and show opposition; and allowing and maintaining a strong civil society with vibrant NGOs and associations that are able to protect and defend citizens' rights.

Last but not least, more than one panelist mentioned that a necessary condition to obtain political legitimacy is for Arab regimes to re-embrace the Palestinian cause. In a way, the road to political legitimacy passes through Al Quds (Jerusalem). One panelist stated, 'When the people took to the streets in Tunisia, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria, they shouted two mottos that went together: '"the people want to bring the regime down" *(al cha'ab yurid isqat al nizham)* and "the people want the liberation of Palestine"*(al cha'ab yurid tahrir filisin)*. This latter motto showed the centrality of the Palestinian cause in the minds of many Arabs, and this revealed that one of the reasons why Arab regimes were seen as illegitimate by their people is because they abandoned the defense of Palestine'.

The intertwining of these two mottos during the Arab revolutions has shown that there is a strong correlation between the status in which Arab populations find themselves as a result of despotism, and the loss of Palestine and their inability to liberate it. In fact, large parts of the Arab populations consider their autocratic regimes as illegitimate precisely because they view them as the outcome of the artificial division of the region by Western imperialist powers. They accuse these regimes of being unable and unwilling to stand against Israel, which they perceive as a Western implant in the midst of their once-united region. A hundred years after the Sykes-Picot agreement, Arab populations continue to experience the establishment of Arab states in artificial territorial borders and the implantation of Israel in the region as a stab in their back and a conspiracy to divide the Ummah. Therefore, an essential condition for Arab regimes to obtain political legitimacy is to reconnect with the Arab nationalist sentiment of Arab populations and to re-embrace the Palestinian cause, including a renewed fight against Zionism. As one panelist stated, 'Once this kind of legitimacy is restored, we will see a different landscape in the MENA region. We will see a region where borders are meaningless, where Arab citizens move freely from one country to another, and where there is no longer any checkpoint that humiliates people. We will see again a united Arab Ummah'.

It is worth noting in this regard that under the rule of the Justice and Development Party, Turkey's initiation for regional integration and reunification has echoed this aspiration of the MENA populations. They wish to have their region reunited as a precondition to achieve a *nahdha (renaissance)* of the Arab world. In 2010, on the eve of the Arab revolutions, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced from Beirut the establishment of a Şamgen space in MENA, a space of free movement of people and goods, that was conceived to be the Middle Eastern equivalent of Europe's Schengen space. However, the Arab revolutions and the crises and chaos they carried with them, together with Western powers' reluctance to support Turkey's foreign policy, killed Turkey's project of regional integration and reunification from its birth.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the gloomy picture of the MENA region today, it is possible to identify a few positive signals that show the region's progress toward a more politically legitimate and sustainable order. First, the recent events in Tunisia, Lebanon and Iraq highlight the people's continued determination to achieve a more legitimate political order, despite the several obstacles and difficulties with which they are faced. In Lebanon and Iraq, people are taking to the streets to challenge the existing political structure and to demand an end to corruption, nepotism and sectarianism. In Tunisia, the election of an independent president, Kais Saied, is raising hope of the instauration of a solid democracy in the country. As one panelist stated, 'While the West is moving towards a trend of disconnection of the state from societies, the MENA region is moving in the opposite direction, that of a reconciliation of societies with political institutions'.

Second, new actors are emerging in Arab societies who can serve as agents for positive change in the region during the coming years. In most parts of the Arab world, the civil society has managed to consolidate itself, and it has acquired tools to exercise its advocacy role effectively and defend the rights of the citizens. An independent media is emerging with the ability to shape public opinion, reveal the corrupt practices of politicians, and promote a new political order based on transparency and accountability. An educated and empowered Arab youth is demanding democracy, freedom and civil rights. Arabs in the diaspora in Europe and the United States have accumulated financial and human resources that enable them to support their home countries' progress towards democratisation, while at the same time playing an advocacy role in Western capitals to influence the policymaking process. These actors all have the potential to be the instigators of positive transformations in the MENA region, laying the foundations for a more politically legitimate, socially inclusive, and economically just order.

The rebirth of political legitimacy will undeniably happen in the MENA region. After all, legitimacy is an Islamic notion: the 'rightly-guided Caliphs' *('al khulafa' al Rashidun')* were unable to rule without first obtaining the consent of the ruled through a pledge *(bi'aa)*; and the notion of *'ijma''* (agreement, consent) is at the heart of Islamic political thought and jurisprudence. Hence, by finding their way to political legitimacy, the largely Muslim countries of the MENA region will only be embracing something that is at the heart of their identity and civilization, and part of their DNA. Surely, the road to political legitimacy will not be paved with roses, but it is not unattainable.

Despite the gloomy picture of the MENA region today, it is possible to identify a few positive signals that show the region's progress toward a more politically legitimate and sustainable order.

References

Akbarzadeh, S. (2016), Why does Iran need Hizbullah?, *Muslim World*, 106: 127-140.

Ayubi, N., (1996). Over-stating the Arab state: Politics and Society in the Middle East. I.B. Tauris.

Barnett, M., (1998). Dialogues in Arab politics. Columbia University Press.

Barr, J., (2012). A Line in the Sand: The Anglo-French Struggle for the Middle East. Simon & Schuster Ltd.

Beblawi, H., Luciani, G. (2015). The Rentier State. Routledge.

Laidi, Z., (2012). Limited Achievements: Obama's Foreign Policy. Palgrave MacMillan.

Luciani, G., Salame, G. (2015). The Politics of Arab Integration. Routledge.

Salamey, I., (2017). The Decline of Nation-States after the Arab Spring: The Rise of Communitocracy. Palgrave MacMillan.

Telhami, S., Barnett, M. (2002). Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East. Cornell University Press.